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THE EASTERN SHORE

A Northern Man Tells Of Visit And What He Saw There—A Country Which Has No History And With People Who Have Some Amiable Weaknesses.

The late Tom Corwin, of Ohio, used to tell a story of a man having every appearance of extreme old age, who was summoned one day as witness in a Western courtroom. "Your age?" was the first question put. "Sixty-seven," croaked the witness, in a voice of senility. The Court looked severe. "Your age?" was repeated. "Sixty-seven," reaffirmed the old man. The court then took occasion to say a few words on the importance of veracity. "Well, your honor," answered the old man, apologetically, "the first 21 years of my life I spent on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. I didn't suppose God Almighty counted that against me. I didn't.

This anecdote was in my mind as, about noon one October day, I alighted at a "caounty taown" of Eastern Maryland from an accommodation train—with the accent on the accommodation—that had dawdled southward from Wilmington, Del., stopping at every woodpile or self-respecting back-door on the way. In the midst of life I was on the Eastern Shore! A stranger in a strange land, the ancient expressman sized me up at a glance, as I handed him my trunk checks. He was a long, lank Southerner, with a patriarchal beard and sharp, aquiline features, shaded by the sombrero-like felt hat of Virginian romance. "Naow, suh, I reckon you all's in God's own country," he drawled, affably. "God's own country!" I echoed in my mind. "Have the people here so poor a lot in this world that they claim a lion's share in the next?"

The region that occasioned these doubtful compliments is known all over the South as the Eastern Shore—or, to adopt the vernacular, "Eastern Sho',"—being that portion of the State of Maryland which shares with the State of Delaware and the eastern shore of Virginia the tapering peninsula that separates Chesapeake bay from the broad Atlantic. Fertile, well-wooded, bland of climate, honeycombed by salt inlets ("creeks") from the Chesapeake, except for its general flatness it might well be called by Badeker the old England of America.

A Country Without A History.

So much for the lay of the land; but of what use Baedeker on the Eastern Shore, when there are no cities to catalogue and no history to chronicle? If the country without a history is the blessed country, then the Eastern Shore must be thrice blessed. In the seventeenth century some English county families, chief among them the Lloyds, of Wye river, settled there on manors granted by the Stuart kings. Later on a few Quakers came thither from Pennsylvania. Such is its story—short and simple as the annals of the poor! There the settlers have lived on, getting wheat from the land and oysters from the Chesapeake, and escaping for the most part the convulsions that have shaken our national life as a whole. The tide of modern industrial progress has swept by these eastern counties, leaving them a placid backwater of the past, one of those few remaining nooks in our great country that have come down to the new century without their press agent, unexplored and unexploited. Two plain facts symbolize the history of the whole region: Near Easton there stands an old Quaker meeting house, once visited by William Penn; at Wye House there still dwells an Edward Lloyd. A land of quiet, the Eastern Shore seems but a step removed from colonial America and still within hailing distance of rural England. On summer night, when the moonlight lies dense on the fields of ripened wheat, and the shadows temper and subdue the new-world crudity of outline that lingers even in this old corner of Maryland, the peaceful landscape, so rich with atmosphere, wants only the hedgerows to make one imagine it the mother country herself—just as the society might conceivably be that of Somerset or Devon.

Of similar districts in Eastern Virginia John S. Wise writes: "But a few years ago this writer sat in the old church at Bishop's Lydiard, Somersetshire, England, and looked over the congregation. The resemblance in appearance between the people assembled there and the congregation he has often seen in the Episcopal church at Eastville and in the Briton parish church at Williamsbury was striking."

English Stock.

The English gentry that settled the Eastern Shore retain the purity of the good county stock from which they are sprung. No alien inroads have disturbed their peaceful existence. Their civilization is rich with the gracious tradition of inherited gentility. It is conservative, aristocratic, and withal intensely Southern. The county families might be called a "close corporation," if commercial language could possibly be applied to them at all. So far as the native born go, their number is fixed. Once accepted, no family can drop out of the enchanted circle until its members have perished from the earth. A great name in the county is indeed "a name forever." On the other hand, no family of humble origin may hope to rise. Once "plain people" (to put it brutally, as one of the other species was heard to say) always "plain people." And both sides seem content. "Society," in its narrow sense, is simply enough constituted on the Eastern Shore. Everybody knows everybody else, and most of them are kindred. Cousins and double cousins abound. The life itself is natural and wholesome; outdoor sports on land and water, according to season; generous hospitality at all times; church on Sundays, and the baying of the hounds is to the Eastern Shoreman as wine to the blood.

To him is also natural the southern love of dignities and titles. True, there were never enough Confederate brigadiers in this district to make possible the story told of a certain Carolina town: "Let's have a drink, colonel," said a Northern visitor to a former opponent in arms with whom he had been swapping war tales in the hotel office, and to the Northerner's surprise every man in the room stood up to accept. Possibly pride of place took a more practical course here, for until the repeal of the "Eastern Shore law," after the Republican party captured Maryland in '96, that portion of the State had long possessed by law one United States Senator and the Governor of Maryland once in three terms—as at present it has Gov. John Walter Smith. This conservative respect for rank occasioned a characteristic incident of which the venerable bishop of the diocese is hero. Being very fond of children, the bishop one day kissed the little daughter of a neighbor of his as she was playing on the sidewalk. With something very like precocious coquetry the child ran in tears to its mother. "Go 'long, child!" exclaimed that lady emphatically, 'an' stop your cryin'. You ought to be proud to say a bishop kissed you."

Monopoly Of Blue Blood.

Unfortunately for the Northern visitor's self-esteem, one little rift within the lute jars the prevailing harmony of his reception. In spite of the unfailing courtesy of his hosts he soons suspects that 40 years of unifying national effort and all the wide brotherhood of a reunited country have not sufficed to upset one little fallacy of the Eastern Shore, for there still prevails the antiquated Southern delusion that every drop of indigo in America was concentrated once for all in the sole veins of the first families of Virginia—and her Colonial neighbors. (Ye shades of tory Portsmouth!) He suspects as much, because to his surprise he now and then meets in local society men and women who roll their R's and do other things "po" w'ite an' common;" such he knows are not of the native born and on inquiry he learns invariably that they are Northerners who have settled there for the climate or the water. Why, he wonders, are "people whom one never meets" in the North tolerated by such sticklers for family as the local lords of the soil? And the only possibly answer is that all Northerners look alike to them. For that reason they accept the Northern sojourners regardless of shades of breeding. A note of protest, to be sure, was sounded by one woman of ancient lineage. "After all," she remarked in confidence, concerning a family of recent settlers from Pennsylvania, "after all the Smiths certainly are plain people. When I called on them Mrs. Smith said she'd show me the rooms upstairs, only they were not 'red up.'" Still the Eastern Shoreman is true to the old tradition that no one born north of Mason and Dixon's line can be—well, quite a gentleman!

Before leaving the region I corrected my first impression. It is not "God's own country" because of its poverty, but because of its wealth, broadly speaking—its wealth in land and in water, and in the kindly fruits of each. When the day of judgment comes Eastern Shore people will, no doubt, gladly resign to the meek the rest of the earth, their heritage, for "God's own country" is a thing apart—the Lord made it on the eight day, after resting the seventh.—*Blair Fortescue, in Springfield (Mass.) Republican.*

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